

Tradition and hope

A Mennonite chain of memory

Sarah Kathleen Johnson

Mennonite identity and ethnicity

A few years ago, I walked into a small Mennonite church in Indiana.¹ A woman warmly welcomed me and asked my name. “Sarah,” I responded.

“What’s your last name?” she asked.

“Johnson,” I replied.

“Janzen?” she responded, hopefully.

“No, Johnson.”

When I visit Mennonite churches as a guest speaker, I am often asked, “What is your maiden name?” I am married, but Sarah Johnson is the name I had when I was dedicated as a baby at First Mennonite Church in Kitchener and later baptized there at age fifteen, when I attended Rockway Mennonite Collegiate for five years and lived at Conrad Grebel University College for four, when I received a master’s degree in theology from Grebel and served as a pastor at Ottawa Mennonite Church, and when I spent five years on the *Voices Together* hymnal and worship book editorial team. Yet it remains inconceivable to some that I serve in leadership roles in the Mennonite church without sharing this ethnic heritage.

For some people, *zwieback*, *rollkuchen*, *vereniki*, farmers sausage, and pie are a big part of what it means to be Mennonite. Yoders, Martins, Klasens, and Wiebes claim Mennonite identity—at times whether they want to or not. These ethnic conceptions of Mennonite identity are reinforced in popular phenomena like *The Daily Bonnet* satire news website (now *The Unger Review*) and the *Mennonite Girls Can Cook* blog and cookbooks.²

1 An earlier version of this essay was written and shared as the Founders’ Day keynote address at the seventy-fifth anniversary of Rockway Mennonite Collegiate in Kitchener, Ontario, in February 2020. Colossians 3:12–17 was the scriptural focus of that gathering.

2 See www.ungerreview.com and www.mennonitegirlscancook.ca, both of which rely heavily on ethnic conceptions of Mennonite identity. While the intent is humour and sharing recipes, a side effect is reinforcing the centrality of ethnicity.

There is nothing wrong with being ethnically Mennonite. Immigrant groups with Swiss, Russian, and Latin-American ties have anchored the Mennonite tradition in Canada and the United States for generations. This is a heritage to celebrate.

But the Mennonite church has changed. More than twenty-five languages are spoken in worship in Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA congregations. Worldwide, the vast majority of Mennonites live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and claim a diversity of ethnic and cultural identities.³ There are more and more people like me:

There is nothing wrong with being ethnically Mennonite, but the Mennonite church has changed.

people who were born into the Mennonite tradition but who do not share a specific ethnic heritage.

I have the privilege of being able to pass as “ethnically Mennonite” because I have been part of settings that taught me how to navigate this culture, and because I am white. This is not the case

for many Mennonites of colour, who are often celebrated as bringing diversity without being fully embraced. Korean Paraguayan Mennonite theologian and pastor Pablo Kim describes his experience of this struggle and calls Mennonites to move beyond superficial multi-culturalism to become deeply intercultural—to practice “genuine engagement among cultures” with “each culture influencing the others,” leading to “mutual transformation.”⁴

Mennonite identity and theology

Along with ethnicity, there is a second way that Mennonite identity is often described: lists of beliefs and practices (“distinctives”) that supposedly set Mennonites apart. Some of the most famous lists are Harold Bender’s *The Anabaptist Vision* (1944), Stuart Murray’s *The Naked Anabaptist* (2007), and Palmer Becker’s *Anabaptist Essentials* (2017).⁵ Often the lists include values like following Jesus, community, and peacemaking.

3 Mennonite World Conference, “Map and Statistics,” <https://mwc-cmm.org/article/map-statistics>.

4 Hyung Jin Kim Sun, “Intercultural Global Theology,” *Vision* 19, no. 2 (2018): 81–89.

5 Harold Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 1944); Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2007); Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials* (Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2017). The Shared Convictions of Mennonite World Conference are in a different category than the other three examples because

There are people who choose to be Mennonite because they are inspired by this vision of Christian faith and life. It can be helpful for all of us to name core values. But it is problematic to define who is and is not Mennonite based on these checklists for at least three reasons.

First, checklists of convictions can make us imagine that religion can be separated from culture, that values can exist apart from context. In real-



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ity, values always come from somewhere and are always lived out somewhere. In addition, those who make these lists—often older, white, European and North American, academic men—are shaped by

their contexts. Do their lists really reflect what it means to be Mennonite for everyone, everywhere?

This brings us to the second problem: many Mennonites would not affirm these lists. Some who identify as Mennonite do not identify as Christian. Those who identify as Mennonite are committed to an increasingly broad range of beliefs and practices. Furthermore, in this secular age, most of us live with doubt and uncertainty.⁶ These lists do not describe the breadth of who Mennonites are today.

The third and most concerning problem of lists of distinctives is that these values are shared with many other Christians; they are not unique to Mennonites. Mennonites have a lot to learn from the Society of Friends (Quakers) about peacemaking, from Benedictine monks about community, and from evangelicals about everyday devotion to Jesus. I have spent most of the past decade on the edge of the Mennonite community: at

they were created and affirmed through a collaborative, consensus-based process in the worldwide church. Furthermore, even within this brief document, there is a sentence that acknowledges it is as much the historical tradition of origin as the content of the convictions that makes them Anabaptist: “In these convictions we draw inspiration from Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century, who modelled radical discipleship to Jesus Christ.” For more on the history of the Shared Convictions, see Sarah Johnson, “The ‘Shared Convictions’ of Mennonite World Conference in Developmental Context and Ecumenical, Anabaptist and Global Perspective,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2009): 36–56.

⁶ Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor describes how the plausibility conditions that make something believable or unbelievable have shifted since the medieval period. This makes unbelief possible and transforms the character of all belief in contemporary contexts. It becomes possible to construct meaning and significance without reference to the divine or transcendence. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). For an accessible guide to Taylor’s argument, see James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

the ecumenical Yale Divinity School, at the Roman Catholic University of Notre Dame, studying varieties of nonreligion in Toronto, and now directing Anglican Studies at Saint Paul University, which is Roman Catholic. There is more that unites us than divides us. There is little we can list that is truly unique.

Mennonite identity as a chain of memory

I want to be clear. There is nothing wrong with being Mennonite based on theological convictions or because of ethnic heritage. But neither of these ways of understanding what it means to be Mennonite is adequate in 2025. Being Mennonite in 2025 is bigger than ethnicity and theology.

I would like to propose a third option: being Mennonite is about belonging to a chain of memory—about claiming connection to a past, a present, and a future that we share. Some of us may be born into this chain of memory. Others may choose it. Still others may stumble upon it. The connection to this chain of memory—however it is formed—is what binds us together.

I am not describing a single chain. I am envisioning a network, a web, that is interconnected, with loops and branches in different directions.

Memory is what characterizes this chain: memories that we have, that we share, and that connect us to larger shared memories.

I borrow the image of the “chain of memory” from French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger who uses it to

define religion: “Religion is an ideological, practical and symbolic system through which consciousness, both individual and collective, of belonging to a particular chain of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled.”⁷ This chain of belief is about action more than ideas. This chain of memory is not a historical fact but rather a social construction, or even an act of faith: “It is not continuity in itself that matters but the fact of its being the visible expression of a lineage which the believer expressly lays claim to and which confers membership of a spiritual community that gathers past, present, and future believers.”⁸ Connection to

7 Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 82.

8 Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, 81.

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the chain of memory depends not on genetics or cognitive affirmation of a checklist of distinctives but on claiming a lineage and belonging to a community, on invoking the authority of tradition.

Tradition

Tradition is another way of speaking about chains of memory. This is not tradition in the sense of annual holiday traditions. Nor is it tradition as a reason to do things the way they have always been done simply because they have always been done that way. Tradition in the sense I use it here is conceived of as dynamic, always changing, always adapting. Imagine a conversation that has been going on for generations and that will continue for generations in the future, which we get to join in for a little while.⁹ Imagine a river flowing swiftly, a steady presence that is ever changing, both tracing and shaping the contours of the landscape; you cannot step in the same river twice.¹⁰

Our Mennonite chain of memory, our Mennonite tradition, stretches back five hundred years to the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement, when a group of people were inspired to follow Jesus differently from their surrounding societies. It stretches back further to the Middle Ages, to lay monastic groups exploring new ways to live in community. It stretches back even further to letters written by an itinerant preacher to a small community in Asia, sharing advice on how to live well together as resurrection people: *Sing with gratitude in your hearts! Show compassion and kindness! Let love bind you together in perfect harmony!*¹¹

Our chain of memory also stretches forward. We still need this advice: *Sing gratitude! Show compassion! Let love bind you together!* We still need

9 This is a positive reframing of Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's description of tradition: "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted." Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12.

10 Clemens Sedmak uses this metaphor to describe the complexity of the Christian tradition: "Rather than talking about the Christian tradition, we might feel more comfortable talking about many little traditions that have shaped Christianity—many small rivers that come together in the sea of the great tradition of Christianity." Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 43.

11 Cf. Colossians 3:12–17.

ways to live in community. We still need to reform the church. Tradition is dynamic, always changing, always adapting.

When chains of memory matter

In 2001, I was a grade 10 student at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate. I was sitting in chapel when the principal got up and announced that the World Trade Center in New York City had been hit by airplanes, and it was probably a terrorist attack. It was the news story that defined my youth. A Mennonite high school was a good place to hear that news and to live through the wars that followed because the community is connected to a chain of memory that says, *Do not respond to violence with more violence*. A chain of memory that says, *You can take action; you can sing for peace on Parliament Hill or march through downtown Kitchener*. A chain of memory that says, *There is hope, even when it seems like everything is falling apart*.

We continue to face communal crises: pandemics, climate change, polarization, economic decline. We continue to face personal struggles: medical diagnoses, broken relationships, disappointed dreams. I do not know what the 9/11s of the future will be or what personal struggles we each will face. I do know that the Mennonite tradition is a good chain of memory to be part of when they happen—because we are bound not only to the people around us but also to people across time, cultures, and Christian traditions.

Links in the chain

As one of the editors of *Voices Together*, I think of each page in the hymnal and worship book as a link in this chain of memory. Each song, prayer, and work of art shares a memory from a specific person or community in a certain time and place. When an item is included in *Voices Together*, everyone who is connected to that song becomes connected to the chain of memory represented in this book—becomes part of this tradition. As we sing one another's songs, new links are added, new connections are made, and our identity grows and changes.

Mennonite institutions are also places where new links in the chain of memory are forged and new connections are made. Congregations, schools, colleges, and social agencies are connecting places in the Mennonite chain of memory. Each person connected to these spaces is linked to this Mennonite chain of memory—whether they are present once or have been in leadership for decades. Our connections to this chain will change

us—in big or small ways—and we will change this chain of memory. This is both good news and bad news.

The bad news is that this chain of memory is far from perfect. Chains of memory, traditions, are messy—messier than tidy checklists or clear-cut genealogies. They bind us to a complicated history and a flawed community. There are people who are part of this chain that make our lives more difficult. There are historic patterns of oppression—of women, of the LGBTQ+ community, of those who dissented. There is the trauma of migration and poverty. There are ways in which we are imprisoned by this chain of memory.

But there is also good news. Because we are part of this chain of memory, we can change it. When we connect who we are to this community, to this tradition, we are changing it. We can build on the parts of the chain that we want to grow. We can live with gratitude, compassion, and love. Each link in this chain holds together memory of the centuries behind us and hope for the years ahead.

About the author

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